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PLATO'S MISTAKE

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PLATO'S MISTAKE

by

Richard Church

London

George Allen & Unwin Ltd

FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1941

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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

in 11-Point Perpetua Type

BY UNWIN BROTHERS LIMITED
WOKING

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Plato's Mistake

THE POET IN THE WORLD OF TOMORROW

I. INTRODUCTION

THIS title, "Plato's Mistake," sounds both playful and impertinent. It is purposely so. I believe that out of playfulness some of the most serious and valuable discoveries emerge. The human mind is playful when it leans back and rests after prolonged efforts towards the best handling of itself and of the world around it. Most often these efforts are apparent failures, and the periods of rest are enforced by despair and disappointment, moods whose painfulness produces a reaction of irresponsibility in which the aspirant, so to speak, says, "I don't care; let duty and ambition and all the noble strivings towards perfection go to the devil." Everybody recognizes such naughty impulses and everybody knows how immediately beneficial they are. They represent the fallow field, the sleeping child, the convalescent man, the exiled hero and the crucified God. They are in miniature the three days in the tomb out of which the reborn and triumphant Saviour of the situation shall come forth.

Then again, something is to be said for impertinence, especially in view of the argument, if it can be called an argument, which is to follow. Prophecy is a serious matter and through the ages it has been surrounded by all the paraphernalia of ritual and pomp and high office. These vestments have been its undoing. They are like the vestments of Culture

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which have been clapped like a heavy dalmatic round the shrinking shoulders of art and music and literature. Periodically there come times when the stuffiness resulting from these practices suffocates the living spark round which they function. We have been passing through such a time. Its stuffiness affects other things as well; politics, ethics, international relations, general morals and so forth. The whole of human life, both as a society and as a privacy, is being questioned by impertinent people. I say impertinent, because it relates back to the moods of playfulness with which I began. Impertinence, like playfulness, is an activity which stands aside from serious purpose. Possessed by either of them, a man takes his eyes from his goal and looks round him at the world at large. It is a worthy vagary. It brings him back to a sight of his fellow-creatures, his own doings, his before and after. It makes him once more conscious of a line of perspective against which he is forced by his restored sense of humour to survey what he has done so far, what he proposes to do, what are the similar activities of his neighbours, and how far these activities are related to, and can be co-ordinated with, his own.

2. A PRESENT-DAY VIEW OF TOMORROW

I will now be solemn for a moment and quote the Classics. The passage is taken from "The Republic of Plato," and it at once challenges the impudence of my title "Plato's Mistake."

"And it would appear that if a man who through wisdom were able to become everything, and to imitate everything, should come into our city, and should want to show us his poems, we should revere him as a sacred, admirable and pleasant person, but we should tell him that there is no such

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person with us in our city, nor is there any such allowed to be, and we should send him out to some other city, pouring oil on his head and crowning him with wool; but we use a more austere poet and mythologist for our advantage, who may imitate to us the diction of the worthy manner, and may say whatever he says according to those models which we established by law at first, when we undertook the education of our soldiers."

Now it strikes me that what Plato proposes here is not dissimilar from what is forecast by many of the learned economists and armchair-statesmen, who since the days of Karl Marx have been preparing the syllabus for the course of life which is to be instituted after the hypothetical revolution that is always about to take place. Many people, a great many people, affirm that this revolution is taking place at the present moment. They say the world is tumbling about our ears, and that from the complete and final ruins an entirely new, untraditional and sporadic era of human society must be built. The articulation of that novel organism will depend principally, if not entirely, upon the immediate and apparent conditions of its environment. No unforeseen factors will be allowed, no elements of mystery. Religion will be rationalized. The human spirit, to say nothing of the human animal impulses, will be trained to expected and required gestures. If the past shall be allowed in any way to influence that carefully disinfected present, it will be served up as a patent food in machine-packed cartons untouched by hand. It will be so germ-proof that there will be no danger that a citizen of the society of tomorrow will catch an unexplainable fever whose high temperatures will create nostalgic longings for an unclean, but lovely, past, and even possible perfervid rebellions towards an unplanned future.

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In such a world, so scientifically organized, every citizen will be guaranteed wide margins of safety. His antiseptic field of personal adventure will be guaranteed. Such a guarantee, however, must mean that it will be prescribed, which is another way of saying that the poor wretch will be living in a concentration camp. Common sense tells us that an argument carried to this extent is a failure. Complete freedom is as impossible as complete virtue or complete knowledge. The most anarchic society permits the individual no more freedom than the potentialities of his own nature and character admit. We live within the fences of our own selves, and it is by our own efforts that these fences are laboriously taken up and removed a little further from the self-centre. This process, a self-disciplinary one, is that which has been in practice during the period when religious doctrine, and particularly Christian doctrine, has supposedly been in control of human society. Its method has been to perfect that society through the perfection of the individual.

But we have seen that the congregation of a number of apparently perfected individuals can result in the most primitive and barbaric mass organism. A community of twenty thousand virtuous and decent men may result in a petty state convulsed by internal strife amongst its members and superstitious antagonism toward any foreign community. Why this is so neither the old theologians, nor the new psychologists can explain. What is so odd is that the Utopia-makers persist in ignoring it. If they do not ignore it they proceed to get round it by a policy of defeatism in which they perfect the community at the expense of the individual virtue. They so purge and bleach and sterilize that virtue, or spirit, in each individual in order to ensure his conformity to the general

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well-being, that his sphere of activity is at once narrowed and all chance of creative adventure spoiled.

That is what Plato proposed to do. You see what he said over two thousand years ago about the free-lance. He proposed to subjugate him and finally to turn him out of the ideal community. Plato would have no use for the large, unexpected, universally-minded geniuses such as Goethe, Leonardo, Dante. We know in fact that Dante *was* turned out of the community which he attempted to inspire to a wider conception of static organization.

Plato goes even further and desiderates precisely what he would propose to do with the poet in his new economy. He would make him a civil servant, and would give him a job in his Ministry of Information, where for a settled salary the poor wretch would function for so many hours a day, imitating "the diction of the worthy manner and saying whatever he says according to those models which we established by law at first, when we undertook the education of our soldiers."

In that Platonic world you see that we should all be soldiers ; man, woman and child. It is a dangerous conception. It is one which certain experimentalists are trying to put into practice. It is one in which humour, with all its oddities, quirks, eccentricities and charm may not be allowed because of its possible interference with, and criticism of, the office procedure by which that perfect State will run.

Within those parts of Europe where this New Order, as it is called, is now alleged to be functioning, the poet does not appear to be having a very happy time. He is crowned, not with wool and chrism of oil as prescribed by Plato, but with the rubber truncheon and the fist of the Gestapo's bully. If he is not thrown into a concentration camp,

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tortured or murdered, he is given a job of work writing up in metrical form the achievements of a Four Year Plan. This seems to me the least exciting material for a poet to work on. I picture myself, or rather the poets of a generation younger than that to which I belong, exploring the poetic possibilities of the work of the Ministry of Reconstruction when, after the war is over, it will set about erecting the numbered and mass-produced parts of standardized buildings in the ravaged towns. Or, as an alternative, the poet of tomorrow may be given the chance of celebrating the new bucolic life brought up to date by the combined efforts of the Ministries of Agriculture and Labour. In the new countryside possibly there will be no "primrose by the river's brim," no "darkling thrush," no "Ruth standing amid the alien corn," because such elements would not conduce to the fullest economic working of the soil. The poet will possibly be told that he must sing a song of phosphates; he will be required to lay down odes on land drainage, or write a sonnet series *re* afforestation, such afforestation consisting mainly of the detestable spruce tree which is apparently the only timber acceptable to the official mind.

I speak in this bitter and satiric way because I speak from experience. I know what it is to be a civil servant as well as I know what it is to be a poet. For a quarter of a century I had to try to carry out both activities simultaneously. In my darkest moods I feel that I failed in both. Even in my most optimistic moods I know that I failed in the work of the Civil Service. All that I learnt from that experience was a warm affection for my colleagues as human beings and a detestation of the bureaucratic machine and the dehumanized, carbolic processes by which that machine, refuelled by the tenets of the Fabian

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Society, administered the Acts of Parliament, whose dreary clauses were originally drafted in the offices of that bureaucracy. The process was as exciting as that of a spider eating its own web. I spell "web" with only one "b."

This sounds most curmudgeonly and irresponsible and I shall be rapped on the knuckles by those welfare workers who can point out quite justly what ameliorative work has been done, is being done and will be done by the Government Departments as their benevolence grows more and more expert and pervasive. But I am not concerned at the moment with the functioning of the democratic or any other form of state. My purpose is to ask what job, if any, the poet will be given within that activity, and whether his brief will permit him to remain a poet in the hitherto accepted meaning of the word.

3. WHAT TOMORROW MAY REALLY BE LIKE

Before discussing the poet, his nature, his manner of working and the conditions necessary to his work, let us look closer at the Utopian idea of what the world will be like when Armageddon is over. It is a question probably neither popular nor useful while we are in the midst of a war which forces all our energies to the single purpose of victory, and to that end obliges us to canalize our critical faculties for fear they should act as deterrents. A man stricken with disease must be sustained with the promise of a perfect well-being after his convalescence. He knows, and the doctor knows, that this promise of perfection is an unattainable ideal, but it is no less valuable for that. Indeed, it may be that the most valuable, the most compelling influences in our lives are the unattainable ones.

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Nevertheless in the consideration of this problem of the poet and his place tomorrow, we must allow a certain amount of scepticism, fed on historical realities, to enter the field. There are bound to be appalling difficulties after the war is over, difficulties which once more will forestall the arrival of that millennium which is always about to come, and which never does come. Dare we hope, for example, that France and Britain will achieve that political and economic unity offered with such a magnificent gesture by Mr. Churchill to Monsieur Reynaud at the moment of France's collapse in June 1940? We know the unhappy reaction which too often turns gratitude into resentment, a reaction which is multiplied in the interrelations of nations because of the intangibility of the emotions aroused therein. And we might look with some apprehension at the possible swing over of sentiment in America. At present the British are heroes standing in the breach, but will that extreme of admiration be maintained when the time comes to discuss the cost of this heroism? These two questions are merely examples of the obscurations which will certainly darken that period which optimists now see as one of unsullied light.

To look at the matter from another point of view, it might be asked whether the world-shaking events of to-day justify people in believing that the world has never been similarly shaken before. There is always the danger, both in private and public life, of being over-stimulated by immediate circumstances and to believe, and act on that belief, that such circumstances warrant the most unprecedented and the most irrational of conduct. Would it not be healthy to remember the anticipations of Europe in 1848, a period when the long-delayed millennium was again about to arrive? Political freedom,

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universal equality and brotherhood, the banishment of poverty, the triumphs of the arts, all these perfections were on the threshold. But somehow they were delayed. Human nature intervened once more, with both its good and evil potentialities, and bungled the introduction of the perfect comity of Europe. Dare we hope that this will not happen again?

Will it be said that these questions indicate a defeatist pessimism? I answer, "No, they do not preclude a belief in the evolution of the society of man." I believe, and I could not value life without this belief, that an increasing public consciousness will permit of more gestures, more economic stability, and more corporative action in every sphere of life. But by reason of the vastness and variety of the human family such evolution cannot be hurried. The power of Leviathan lies in weight, not in speed. Out of the enormous mass of terrible racial experience—such as the present war—it seems that nature distils a tiny drop of progressive wisdom. Individual men and women, illuminated by genius, may jump forward here and there; but the truth is that in the aggregate, humanity is a huge, slow, stupid force, doomed to move at the rate dictated by its majority, which is a majority held back by abysmal ignorance, superstition, prejudice, fear and brutality. And as I said earlier, these mob instincts control the masses, whose individual members are decent, humane and modest people. Here is a mystery which we are not likely to rationalize and control before the time comes in the near future when our task shall be to rebuild a broken world.

4. THE FINE ARTS TOMORROW

But enough of these doubts! At the present time they sound almost sinister and subversive. If we are destined to pass on to

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a tomorrow, rent by the troubles which have beset humanity wherever two or three are gathered together, then the poet will be sure of his place at the bottom of the scrum, receiving as usual more kicks than breathing space. All fine talk about establishing him in a definite niche in the new social order will be wasted, because he will be born only into a social disorder, free to sing songs urging the still unattained perfection of life on earth.

We will assume, however, that when the war is over mankind will determinedly get together to establish a better state of affairs. It is obvious that at once practitioners of the applied arts will be called in. There will be an infinite variety of tasks for the architect, the engineer, the chemist, the sociologist, the surgeon and possibly even the theologian. All these men and women, so far as they will have to apply their science to the making of a new world, will be artists. Indeed we might accept the vision of that man of genius, Eric Gill, who saw in the democracy of tomorrow a human brotherhood in which every man was raised to a freedom of self-expression that would justify us in calling him an artist, so that in a way the word would lose its somewhat oracular significance. All men, merely by living and working in that society of the future, would be artists. It is a glorious dream of responsibility and fruitfulness, and beauty succeeding to everyday manifestation. Even if we look upon this as a remote dream of perfectability, we certainly can prophesy with some readiness about the position of the applied arts, and the people who will practise them in the world tomorrow. Design will be the order of the day. New cities and all implied thereby, will have to be made; buildings and furniture, machines and parks will have to be reorganized. It is not extravagant to believe that

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the teachings of Ruskin and William Morris in the nineteenth century and of Eric Gill and Herbert Read in the twentieth century will bear fruit. These four monitors of good taste have pointed the way toward the adaptation of the form of every vehicle to its utility. In the case of the machine, such as the aeroplane, the dynamo, the submarine, the motorcar, we see how necessity has forced designers towards that perfect condition of unity between purpose and shape. There is no meaningless ornament on a Hawker Hurricane. The idea behind that has been only too slowly accepted, and this universal acceptance to-day is one of the greatest causes for hope about the shape of things to come tomorrow. It really does appear certain that mankind generally is now conscious of the right aesthetic toward the machine-made article. In the beginning of the machine-age Ruskin thundered from his secular pulpit about the wrong road which manufacturers were taking. He pointed at the iron seats cast in imitation of rustic woodwork and he foresaw in the grotesque misuse of that material and that new method a warning of the aesthetic disaster which must inevitably overtake humanity if such a blind course were pursued. He was ignored and the course was pursued. That course has been examined with clarity by Mr. Herbert Read recently in a pamphlet which he calls, "To Hell with Culture," in a series published by Kegan Paul. This critic's work is always inspired by an austere nobility which is particularly valuable today. He concerns himself in this pamphlet with that wrong turning, prophesied by Ruskin, which industrialism took at the instigation of the greed aroused by the coming of the machine. The problems of mass production for the purpose of profit are dealt with by Mr. Read and it is outside my purpose to discuss them here. War-

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time necessities are forcing us to curb that greed, and it is possible that unless we slip back the world tomorrow will utilize the machine, not for profit-making, but for a reasoned usefulness in the fight to control nature and to ameliorate the certainty that man is a creature born for sorrow.

It is certain that tomorrow the architect will take a prominent part in restoring civilization. I see already signs of danger. A recent letter in the press from an architect advocated the building of houses which would not last for more than thirty years. This seems to me to be an example of that flying to extremes which is one of the greatest weaknesses of humanity. Here we are saddled with the hideous architectural mistakes of the past, and particularly of the nineteenth century, and the still more horrid early twentieth century. In short, reaction from the hideous legacy, this architect, and that large body for whom he is spokesman, wants us to have nothing more static in what is fundamentally a static art. He would cancel out all the potentialities of tradition, and the accumulation of future tradition, with which the granary of the human spirit should be stored. In reply to him I would quote some words which Ruskin spoke in 1858 when he addressed himself to the architects of his age:

“And observe, in this last respect, what a peculiar importance, and responsibility, are attached to your work, when you consider its permanence, and the multitudes to whom it is addressed. We frequently are led, by wise people, to consider what responsibility may sometimes attach to words, which yet, the chance is, will be heard by few, and forgotten as soon as heard. But none of *your* words will be heard by few, and none will be forgotten, for five or six hundred years if you build well. You will talk to all who pass by; and all those little sympathies, those freaks of fancy, those jests in stone, those

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workings-out of problems in caprice, will occupy mind after mind of utterly countless multitudes, long after you are gone. You have not, like authors, to plead for a hearing, or to fear oblivion. Do but build large enough, and carve boldly enough, and all the world will hear you; they cannot choose but look."

It astonishes me that this architect should come forward with such a confusing proposal at a time when we have already emerged from the faults which induced our grandfathers to make railway coaches, and later motorcars, in the form of horse-drawn coaches. I would suggest to him that he should reread Lessing's "Lacöon," in which the differentiation between the functions of the fine arts, especially their application to static and to dynamic purposes, was laid down. Sufficient here to say that in Mr. Read's words "fitness for function is the modern definition of the eternal quality we call beauty, and this fitness for function is the inevitable result of an economy directed to use and not to profit." This really is an enlargement of the axiom which Eric Gill states in the following words: "What is decoration but that which is seemly and appropriate?"

5. THE POET TOMORROW

I seem to have been putting off my examination of the place of the poet in the world of tomorrow. First, however, it was necessary to glance at the other arts in order to emphasize the difficulty of allotting the poet a utilitarian function in that world. It is apparently simple to foresee where the architect, and even the painter, will be employed. Indeed we have already had examples, as in the case of the commissioning by the socialist state of Mexico of Rivera to decorate public

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buildings in such a magnificent way that his work has become one of wonders of the modern world. Artisans of every kind will similarly fit into the new economy which under the pressure of a healthy post-war poverty will become an economy that is also an aesthetic. Domestic utensils will have of necessity to be as simple and as fit to the hand as the spade and the hoe; and thank God for that. Wherever spurious ornament is impossible, the designer has to brace himself to austere pattern making that will bring out the potentiality of each object and will make it a thing of bone-true beauty. Everything we have, everything we use will be bettered by this necessity, whose requirements will have to be controlled by some sort of central authority, such as that Ministry of Reconstruction to which I referred earlier. May heaven forefend that this Ministry of the future shall be controlled by politicians dictated to by big business out once more on its predatory prow after profits.

So much for the artists in concrete things and the definition of their job in a more socially organized State. But what of the practitioners in more abstract mediums? What, even, of those artisans more fully equipped with talent and specialized ability, such as the sculptor and the mural painter? Will their imaginative use of material equally be dictated by the central authority? It is obvious in this question that here we reach a danger-point. Still further do we plunge into dangerous possibilities when we contemplate the workers in the abstract medium of sound, and the semi-abstract medium of words; the musician and poet of tomorrow. Here are the two *useless* creatures whose job it appears is merely to entertain the tired pioneer in a young society, and the jaded sensualist in a mature society.

The economic position of these two kinds of artist has

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never been solved. There have been periods in history, such as the Golden Age of Greece and that of the Renaissance City States of Italy, when a small enlightened republic of aristocrats in the first, and rich banker princes in the second, offered poets and musicians a comfortable patronage with the minimum of sterilizing restraint. Similarly, in the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church rightly fathered both artist and artisan. But the Golden Age vanished, and the great princes were succeeded by debauchees. Patronage showed itself more definitely as a form of domestic service and even of slavery. We can recall the famous instance of Dr. Johnson's attendance in the waiting-room of Lord Chesterfield. It was Dr. Johnson and other forerunners of Grub Street whose independence of spirit began the destruction of an already decadent economic method by which writers and musicians were enabled, along with other vagabonds, to snatch their bread and butter. But even now the poet proper is a cousin of poor Lazarus at the gate. Unless he is born into the rentier class he is doomed to earn his living by any other means than the work to which his whole nature is dedicated and which in every case ought, for its fullest development, to be a whole-time job. Frequently he enters one or other of the polite professions. He may be a doctor like the late Poet Laureate, he may be a civil servant or a lawyer. Frequently, however, the nature of his urge and spiritual endowment unfits him for a professional life and he is forced into an existence not far short of privation. We know how even within recent times Francis Thompson was a bookseller's errand boy. I could name one or two of the youngest poets of today whose talent is exceptional and genuine. They exist on the charity of their Bohemian friends and on the occasional small advances from benevolent pub-

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lishers who suspect that they will never get their money back though they vaguely hope that the young poets in question will turn to the writing of popular fiction.

How is this to be remedied? Is it necessary, as unctuous Philistines assert, that a poet should starve in a garret in order to produce his best work? Of course it is not. Anxiety is to poetic impulse like frost to flowers, especially the sordid anxiety of one's daily welfare which is only too constant a reminder of the fact that our feet are feet of clay. The utilitarian, and it is he who too frequently has a voice nowadays in the proposals about the shaping of the world of tomorrow, would deal summarily with these social misfits. He would send them to the Ministry of Labour training camps and equip them with a technique as engineers or carpenters or agricultural workers, and then would send them out to whole-time manual labour, with the recommendation to scribble verses in their spare hours. That sounds a reasonable way of providing the bread and butter for the creative genius whose artistic work is not immediately assessable as a social asset. It is certainly preferable to the methods adopted by the totalitarian governments. We know, for example, that in Russia poets' books are published by the State which takes the responsibility for their welfare. But under what conditions? Should a poet arise who hates tractors, or who is inspired by a magnificent indignation about the peculation and inefficiency of his local Commissar, what would be done about the publishing of the resulting poem? Obviously it is expected by administrative officials, for such is their very nature, that in return for a guarantee of subsistence the poet should work within prescribed limits, and that his poetic output should supply some particular need as envisaged by the administrative

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machine. Thus we can conceive that in the socialized State run by an all-party government after the war the possible Ministry of Culture in conjunction with the Ministry of Agriculture will decide that the time has come to stimulate the raising of hogs in a county hitherto given to sheep-rearing. The farmers of that part of the country will have, therefore, to be urged in this direction and it will be the job of the poets of the period, fed and housed by the Ministry of Culture, to report to that county and to flood it with admonitory verses written to the specific purpose in hand. This seems ridiculous, but it is precisely what is happening in the socialized states of today. Further, the average administrative official and the average politician would see nothing out of the way in it because such people are too often obtuse in these matters and are trained by their professions to look for immediate results.

It is both futile and crude to pretend that creative artists are necessarily angels of light, and that men of affairs are ministers of darkness. A cynical attitude toward all public life, politicians and officials, is a customary but misleading one. It does seem roughly true, however, to say that a man in a legislative or an administrative position is by the necessity of that position forced into points of view and conduct which are always compromised by some external necessity. Their minds become habituated, therefore, more to the mechanics of political, social, moral and technical manipulation than to the absolute values of the artist and scientist. With us, Ministers of State, Civil Servants, heads of Universities, Trade Union leaders (including the medical profession's Union), may be individual men of real insight into the highest values of human thought and action. They may be men of impeccable taste in

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music, literature and the fine arts. But in their public capacity they are unable entirely to follow their own tastes. Even where such a public man is a genius of powerful self-assertion such as Sir Christopher Wren, he becomes a Gulliver tied down by innumerable small threads as soon as he tries to function in public office. We hear much about the natural good taste of the general public and the proletariat. I believe this is mere sentimentalism. I believe that Shakespeare was right when he spoke with disgust about the mob and its "sweaty nightcaps." He spoke in an age before a vast and unrooted population had been spored upon the world by industrialism. All the faults of the Elizabethan mob, a mob of natural numbers and still refined to some extent by traditions of religion and handicraft and even of a useful superstition, have been magnified to the point of horror in the mob today. It is a city-bred mob that knows no approach to nature except one of bewilderment and destruction. Turn it loose in a spring-time wood and see what the result is—the bluebells are torn up and the empty bottles and waste paper are confettied about the roots of the trees. Turn that same mob loose in the field of literature. It will revel in the sensational papers, the racing news and the sub-human novelettes. This applies both to rich and poor. The eager idealist poets of the nineteen-thirties will condemn these remarks as reactionary. They will point out that the mob has only to be better housed, and ensured of an old-age pension in order to turn with sudden enlightenment to all that is sane and beautiful in literature and the arts.

I see no reason for agreeing with them. The fact is that the great majority of people at any one time and any one place or sphere of life are content with an extremely low standard of taste in the arts and literature. The best books, the immortal

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books, are always being bought and read, but by only a few people at a time. For example, the cheap editions of Turgeniev's novels sell about fifty copies each a year. I think that if the sales of such books as Dante's "Divine Comedy," Milton's "Paradise Lost," Wordsworth's "Prelude," Sir Thomas Browne's "Religio Medici" or Gilbert Murray's "Religio Grammatici," were examined it would be found that their annual sales were not more than a few hundred copies each per year. The immortality of the best is a continuous, but thin thread.

It may be argued from this that people of keen sensibility in these matters of the arts are abnormal, just as a brilliant mathematician is abnormal. To satisfy their sensibility they have to climb to heights which the great mass of mankind is both unwilling and unable to strive for.

It is said by optimists that education will enable them to reach these heights inhabited by the few great creative minds. It may be so, but they come there with their picnic baskets, their waste paper and bottles. They uproot the flowers which they find there and throw them away on the homeward journey to the comfortable valleys. Thus a semi-illiterate public is worse than an illiterate one. In the days before universal education society was divided culturally into clerics and the rest. These clerics were people with a vocation for letters and scholarship, and their work was intense. The rest of the people adopted a legend of magic about them and left them alone, except for occasional burnings at the stake. It may be that this differentiation was much healthier than the disgusting amorphous merging brought about since the Education Act of 1870. Certainly something has gone wrong with the process of establishing a literate public. We may blame Lord Northcliffe, or more generally the industrial-

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capitalist system. We know that there is no alternative method except that proposed by the gangster bosses of the totalitarian states, men who have expressed themselves explicitly on this matter of education and culture. We are forced, even the most reactionary of us, to proceed with the process of maintaining, or rather of establishing, an enlightened public. No decent person would wish to do otherwise. But this purpose need not blind us to the fact that in general the mass of the people, no matter how much they may be offered in the way of art, literature and music, persist in remaining not only indifferent, but antagonistic to it. It is due possibly to their own natures. Here I would deny the Marxian principle that a silk purse can be made out of a sow's ear. They are not to be blamed, however; indeed, it is this tendency to blame them which only makes matters worse—priggish and superior academics whose job it is to conduct the mission of enlightenment persist in patronizing them and in pointing out how vulgar they are and how low is their standard of taste. The mob tries to make amends by rewarding the academics with a show of respect, just as the schoolboy does his master. But like the schoolboy it secretly tears up the lesson book, the immortal works which it is supposed to revere in preference to Hollywood films and the Sunday papers.

What remains, therefore, is a sustained relationship of humbug between the academics and the people: that is an over-simplified and elementary statement of the conditions of social life, which are ignorance, the myriad other obscurations due to erring human nature, the greed which consumes every heart, the mental indolence, the fear, with all their ramifications of snobbery, subterfuge and pretence. The greatest statesman cannot escape from these activities working within

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his own nature and in the people whom he has to pretend to govern. As soon as a man leaves the hermitage of his own mind and emotions, and undertakes to guide or control other people, he is forced into the intricate compromise by which the best shall be set against the worst upon the fulcrum of the indifferent. All this leads to the control of things by the lowest common denominator, and it is this lowest common denominator which functions in all bureaucratic control. It leads to perpetual caution, sitting on the fence, red tape and general obstructiveness. It is not the golden but the tinsel mean toward which our Civil Service accommodates its technique. Young men with administrative ideals enter the Civil Service determined to remove this dead weight. In fact they do achieve something, but it is only a very little in a very long time—such departments for example as our enlightened Board of Education, or the Training Department of the Ministry of Labour may be pointed to as examples of purely enlightened administrative effort toward the better standing of the people. But while they are controlled by a Treasury which is a direct spokesman of interests purely financial they will never be able to work with a free and honest gesture. We see, hour by hour, the vigorous and hopeful administrators in our Government departments being stifled by the bureaucratic machine of which they are forced to become a part. The very nature of centralized control is in itself a danger in so far as it removes responsibility and judgment from a close relation to local circumstances. But this is only part of the deterrent which would quickly be remedied if cold Treasury control depended upon something other than balance sheets.

All this is a wide digression, but it has some bearings upon the conditions in which the poet works today and in which,

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emphatically, he will have to work tomorrow. When the war is over our educational system will be more standardized and more centrally controlled than it is at present. It is most probable that all eccentric forms of education such as experimental schools and our famous public schools will be brought under State control and made thereby to conform to a regularized curriculum. We may be unduly afraid of this, but there is some cause for fear. The standard timetable must certainly tend to deaden the sense of vocation within any inspired teacher. It is that sense of vocation with its attendant enthusiasm which makes that teacher memorable to children, and inspires the likely few with an appetite for scholarship and for the best that can be found in art and science. Without such individual teachers the most perfected educational system is of little value. It can only produce an insipid average of Philistines whose culture is a veneer, and whose self-conscious interest in the best that art and science and religion can offer is a sham.

In a rigid State control of education, therefore, such as is probable in the future and as we must envisage it under present conditions of political and bureaucratic organization, originality and enthusiasm in teachers will be restricted and dulled. I think, in contrast, of that wonderful condition of poetic incubation pictured by Mr. Maurice Baring in his novel called "C." There we are shown a boy at Eton entering the world of poetry under the guidance of a house-master who was one of the rare folk. It was an intense and intoxicating experience, and Mr. Baring succeeded in communicating it to the reader in such a way that its influence must be permanent. Will such an experience be possible in State-controlled schools of tomorrow? Will the poetic impulse or the response to it flourish

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in such a world of regulated instruction? I wish I could give an optimistic answer.

So much for the guidance of the public towards the arts. Amid such a public with its natural tendency towards indifference and boredom, emphasized by a tendentious educational system, how will the poet practise his art? Let us imagine a concrete example. Let us picture Shelley. It is useful to take him as an example because he was a boy at that same school which Mr. Baring has shown to be evocative of the most imaginative mental effort. But Shelley found just the opposite. To him Eton was a brutalizing and terrible experience. This contrast shows how our education depends upon the individual relationship between any particular teacher and pupil, and how a system of education is possibly in all cases pernicious.

We will now imagine that Shelley is about to be born. He will thus begin to write his violently revolutionary, youthful verse in about the year 1960, under the stimulation of some William Godwin of the period. He will have his Castlereagh too, but in this case it will probably be a dogmatic Trade Union leader jumped into public office because of his platform capacity and his shop-keeping methodicalness in the manipulation of working men's cards and votes.

The difference will be that Shelley will no longer have a private income of £1,000 a year from his perplexed father. He will have to exist possibly as a research chemist, for he will certainly get no Fellowship from his Oxford college where he will have gone on a State scholarship won by his intellectual brilliance. In such a job he might be in a position to write his verse indifferent to criticism from above. On the other hand his indifferent health and the oddities of his personality may unsuit him for a bread-and-butter job to be carried

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on alongside his poetic activity. His tendency to phthisis may keep his vitality so low that he simply cannot work in the day and exhaust himself in his spare time in the making of verse. W. B. Yeats has shown how exhausting that activity can be.

The young poet will therefore be reduced to living on some form of income which will be an adaptation of the present unemployment pay or dole. In return for this he will be expected to show some results. Entered in the books at his local Employment Exchange as a poet by profession, he will have periodically to bring for the scrutiny of the Government officials copies of his verses to prove that he is still entitled to maintenance at the expense of a benevolent State. Sooner or later the time will come for him to write once more his "Prometheus Unbound." I can see that day when a tall, weedy and delicate-looking creature will enter through the doors of the Employment Exchange and look around him with a shudder of distress. His shining but frightened eye will pass over the other applicants standing in the queue and he will shrink within himself. He will sniff the semi-fuggy, semi-disinfected air of the Government office as he waits his turn to be scrutinized through the wire mesh at the counter. At last that turn comes, and the bored clerk is handed a sheaf of papers containing the verses which Shelley has written during the past week. The top one consists of the following famous lyric:

"On a Poet's lips I slept
Dreaming like a love-adept
In the sound his breathing kept:
Nor seeks nor find he mortal blisses,
But feeds on the aerial kisses
Of shapes that haunt Thought's wildernesses.

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He will watch from dawn to gloom
The lake-reflected sun illumine
The yellow bees in the ivy-bloom,
Nor heed nor see what things they be—
But from these create he can
Forms more real than living Man,
Nurslings of Immortality!"

The clerk will glance down this until he comes to the lines,

"He will watch from dawn to gloom
The lake-reflected sun illumine
The yellow bees in the ivy-bloom
Nor heed nor see what things they be."

The clerk will frown and look up at the claimant, "Do you mean to say," he will demand, "that you have spent a whole day during the past official week looking at bees without finding out what they really are?" Shelley will begin to murmur something in so shy a manner that it cannot be heard, but he will be intercepted by the clerk, who will say abruptly, "Claim disallowed." At this the poet, distressed by thoughts about the alimony which he must pay Harriet, will suddenly become enraged and through the wire mesh his shrill voice will force the clerk to attend to the lines that follow:

"But from these create he can
Forms more real than living Man,
Nurslings of Immortality!"

The clerk, a servile creature, will be impressed by the authoritativeness of Shelley's outburst, but he will make further objections about "Nurslings of Immortality" as never having heard of them and doubting whether they are insurable, and so forth. However, impressed by the poet's wasteful expense

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of spirit on so mundane a matter he will pass the chit for the weekly dole, and Shelley will emerge, half-weeping with reaction, to Mary waiting outside with the three children in a pram.

Such are the possibilities of State maintenance and control of a poet in the world of tomorrow. How will they react upon his work? Will it be possible for Government officials to handle such people in such a way that the lashing tongue of the sergeant-major is never felt? I think it may be, but before it is possible common human nature will have definitely to become more imaginative and more receptive to the unusual things and personalities. Recently I heard a soldier broadcast an appeal for consideration to be given to others in the comings and goings, and encounterings of strangers necessitated by war-time conditions today. He pointed out what hell he had been through at school because he had been sent there equipped with combinations instead of the usual pants and vests. The poet is a creature with some unusual equipment of nerves, mind and spirit. In many respects he is more naïve, more primitive, than the man in the street. His sense of values is different. Bernard Shaw once described him as "an unmoral creature who would convert his mother's milk into printers' ink," and in this respect what is sacrosanct to the average man is a matter of indifference to the poet. He may beget children loosely and desert wives frequently while maintaining a savage integrity towards the placing of his rhythms and the purity of his images. From one point of view, therefore, he may be an undesirable member of society, or not even a member of society at all. He may be warped, fantastic as was T. L. Beddoes; he may be pathological as was Francis Thompson; he may be a megalomaniac as was Benjamin Robert Haydon;

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he may be an uncomfortable giant as was Beethoven: he may be a cold egoist as was Milton. Not one of these creative men, however, would I care to see under a system so susceptible to the stupid and insulting jockeying of some typical executive official in a Government office.

What, then, will have to be done about it? Will the public become so enlightened that it will devise a machinery of maintenance for such people without desiring to restrain them in any way from the exuberance of their genius? Will they be given that latitude which society gave them in the cruelly liberal past when it was indifferent both to their work and to their welfare? Again these are questions which cannot be answered with much optimism, except by those people who believe in the immediate perfectability, not alone of human nature in individuals, but of mankind in the mass, a much more horrifying force.

All that I should care to prophesy would be that in the world of tomorrow the poet will still be odd man out amongst his own generation. His adventures in society consequent upon his eccentric pursuit of his art are likely to be as varied as have been the lives of poets in the past. He will always recoil with disgust and despair, especially from the practice and pursuits of mankind in the mass on holiday. He will detest its noise, its crassness, its longing for petty distractions and its abysmal stupidity. He will turn with relief to the cultivation of abstract ideals of human conduct and government, and he will find a part justification for these ideals in his contact with a few individuals whom he will recognize with surprise and gratitude as beings enlightened equally with himself. With these people he will make a small, intellectually snobbish community within the large community, wherein he will be enabled to

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preserve the illusion of his vocation, his assurance of immortality, his value both present and future and the respect and possible admiration from others which he believes is due to him and his office as poet.

Meanwhile the great mass of mankind, much cleaner in its habits, much more equipped to talk about the amenities of art and culture, much more perfectly drilled in the disguising of its indifference towards the most beautiful and the most true, will tread its way through the centuries and in doing so will occasionally tread the poet underfoot.

This sounds aloof and superior, particularly at a time when anxiety and sorrow beset every man and woman. In fact it is not so; it is only the irritation which is the shadow of love and faith. We are most exacting where we are most devoted and hopeful, and the note of exasperation which sounds through my words is no more than a paradoxical expression of my belief in the potential nobility in the creative force of ordinary folk. It is this belief which makes me impatient of any proposals to coerce them by tyranny and bureaucracy. I rage against the stupid oppression which men put upon each other through the machinery of officialdom. Such oppressions, by their coldness and impersonality, can amount to the capital sin against the Holy Ghost. A free democracy can exist only where there is a machinery of government so organized that it operates locally and towards an immediate contact with the governed. Such immediate contact we see in practice to-day in the *ad hoc* organizations for relief of bombed cities. These are human activities, and how different they are from the activities of the coldly theoretical State working on perfect, but sterile, abstract principles. Let us leave these principles to the totalitarians, and beware that in destroying these Servile

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States we do not forge weapons that later we see turned against ourselves.

How best can we maintain this watchfulness? It can be done by the poets. But the poets can do it only if they are allowed to be true to their own vagary. Their particular form of insanity must remain unfettered because it is a sublimation and not a degradation of the normal, sane outlook on life. It is true, as Plato said, that poets are a nuisance in the community, but their nuisance value is society's salvation. Their eccentricity is one of exploration, and in flying from the centre of the State community they fly towards a wider circumference, toward which that community can extend its political and moral consciousness.

To do this the poet need not be that major, commanding figure described by Plato in my quotation at the beginning of this survey. The Goethes, the Dantes and the Shakespeares are few. The smaller poets play an equally important part in the aeration of society. Their detachment, their charm, their unacceptance, even their follies and wilfulness are valuable correctives to the steadiness and safety which are being forced upon the human race through its own increasing scientific control.

It is possible that within a hundred years mankind will be so mechanically coherent that the possibilities of disaster will be removed. But will "fallings from us, vanishings" be banished from the spirit of individuals? Will personal joy and sorrow be smoothed away? The answer is obvious, and equally obvious is the fact that no Government succour will ever exist to counteract the private tragedy or stimulate the private comedy. Men and women, yes, and certainly children too, will still need to follow the will-o'-the wisp, the poet. Shelley will

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emerge from the Employment Exchange where a grudging official has handed over his weekly maintenance, and will find himself acclaimed by innumerable people, anxious to touch the edge of his garment; and once more he will break into song, with confidence and hope renewed. Once more "the ineffectual angel," as the school inspector, Matthew Arnold, called him, will be the most valuable minister to the people, a Minister without Portfolio.

